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RELIGIOUS FORCES IN THE UNITED STATES, 1815-1830¹

The influence of religion upon the development of American political and social institutions has ever commanded attention from foreign visitors to the United States. This was especially true during the early part of the nineteenth century while the European mind was still in doubt as to the feasibility of effecting complete separation of church and state. The progress of the American experiment, therefore, was watched with interest as well by political as by religious thinkers. The subject naturally was treated in greater detail by religious writers who were specifically concerned with the ecclesiastical aspect, but whatever the point of view, whether religious or political, it seemed apparent to all that conditions existing in the United States at that time were peculiarly favorable to the development of a new religious ideal. De Tocqueville, for instance, commented at length as Tench Coxe had done a generation before upon the merits of the American system which left the religious organization immune from state interference. Montalembert, speaking in the French chamber, assured his colleagues that no evils had resulted from the separation of church and state. By the middle of the century the Reverend Philip Schaff went so far as to predict that America would prove "to be the Phenix grave, not only of all European nationalities—but also of all churches and sects," and that "out of the mutual conflict of all something wholly new will [would] arise." At the close of the century a French critic, noting the characteristics which differentiate "American religion" from the religion of European countries, implied that this mid-century prediction has been fulfilled. M. Henri Bary, moreover, is frankly of the opinion that this "American religion" which he has so clearly analyzed constitutes the most original and perhaps the most valuable contribution which the United States has thus far made to civilization.

In 1900, when his words were being put into print in Paris, it

¹ This paper was read at the annual meeting of the Mississippi valley historical association in St. Paul, May 9, 1918.

is not unlikely that a consensus of intelligent opinion in the United States would have unhesitatingly repudiated the author's assumption. Some, no doubt, would have argued that since each and every religious sect is upon an equal footing in the United States there could never be evolved a characteristic or national religious faith. The generation of that day was prone to rely upon social rather than upon religious agencies for the preservation of American ideals and few would have then conceded to religion a rank higher than education among the vital forces of American life. Nevertheless the fact remains that a series of religious experiments commensurate with the political experiment in which religion has played so important a part has been slowly and gradually worked out in this country during the century of isolation which followed the second war with Great Britain. Under the peculiarly favorable conditions afforded by the United States all denominations became imbued to some extent with a common religious spirit which may very properly be designated as American. The principle of religious liberty was here for the first time put to the practical test of experience. Religious organizations of whatever faith could therefore be established upon a national basis. The mingling of many sects softened the old antagonisms and brought about mutual respect of creed. Subject alike to the operation of state and federal laws, each and every denomination might claim the equal protection of state and federal authorities. Moreover, in so far as their numbers and resources would permit, all denominations were accorded an opportunity to participate with the government in practical measures for amelioration of human ills. At the present moment, therefore, American religion in its practical manifestations has been recognized as an essential factor both in national and international affairs.

In the light of this present day recognition a study of the development of religious forces in the United States would not be out of place were it not for the extraordinary difficulties which confront the investigator. The complexity of the subject is due in part to the enormous mass of source material which has not yet been assembled. It is further enhanced by the fact that religious development has inevitably affected, as in turn it has been affected by, economic and political conditions in differ-

ent sections of the country as settlement advanced. Monographs and special studies afford little appreciable aid inasmuch as the few at present available are limited in scope, relating either to the activities of a particular religious sect or to a relatively small physiographic area. Owing to these untoward conditions, therefore, nothing more than a tentative preliminary survey can be attempted at present. The year 1815 suggests itself as a logical and convenient starting point, for by that time the distinctive features which characterize American religion of today had already taken form, and in religion as in every other phase of national development the period from 1815 to 1830 was one of rapid organization and expansion.

The principle of religious liberty, the fundamental principle of religious life, had long since been proclaimed. Enunciated first in the state constitution of Virginia and later embodied in the constitution of the United States, this principle has only gradually been made effective in the nation as a whole. In 1815 religious liberty was generally conceived as applying solely to Christian faiths, and the particular forms of Christianity then popularly approved were distinctly orthodox in creed. The fact that this was a Christian country and that its institutions were Christian institutions was accepted without question. It had, moreover, been given legal sanction in several states by constitutional provision, by legislative enactment, or by judicial decision. Anti-Christian elements were by no means aggressive except perhaps in remote regions where "Freethinkers" dwelt in small communities. Jewish congregations were so few in number that the ultimate conversion of that race was confidently expected. Organizations of national scope had already been established by five denominations. Methodist, Presbyterian, and Protestant Episcopal churches had severed their connection with ecclesiastical organizations in Great Britain during the "critical period" before the adoption of the constitution. The Catholic church about the same time obtained recognition from the vatican of its independence of every foreign jurisdiction save that of the holy see. In 1814 a Baptist national organization had been effected by the logical method of uniting local Baptist associations in a general Baptist missionary convention. The Congregational churches of New England, although without a

national association, were acting in coöperation with the Presbyterian general assembly under a "plan of union" adopted in 1801. They were, moreover, exerting a vigorous influence upon religious life through the American board of foreign missions which had been organized under Congregational influence in 1810 for the avowed purpose of concentrating the missionary activities of all protestant denominations in the United States under the direction of a missionary board having a well-defined national character. The American bible society founded in 1816 and the American Sunday-school union established in 1817 may likewise be accepted as evidence that religious organizations had responded to the national ideal. From the inadequate data available it is impossible to estimate with any degree of accuracy the relative strength of the several denominations. Yet grouping together Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Calvinistic Methodists, and Calvinistic Baptists, it is evident that at the beginning of this period protestantism in its Calvinistic form was the predominating religion in the United States. Episcopalans were confined to the seaboard, Quaker numbers had relatively declined, Catholics were still a small minority, while the lesser protestant sects had comparatively little influence outside their limited local area. This predominance of Calvinistic influence, however, was not long to remain unchallenged. The rapid settlement of the west, affording an unprecedented opportunity for religious development, furthered the growth of those sects which could best adapt their activities to the needs of a frontier population. The following decade, therefore, witnessed an almost phenomenal increase in Methodist and Baptist churches, and by 1830 the Catholic church was also prepared to claim recognition as one of the vigorous forces in American religious life.

Amid the bewildering variety of creeds and of dogma, of religious observance and of ecclesiastical polity in the United States, there was already manifest a noticeable uniformity in religious traits which all denominations tended to approximate. This tendency was in part the effect of local environment, in part the expression of commonly accepted religious ideals. In the early nineteenth century American religious experience was emphatically individualistic. The free-born American, being acquainted with many and varied forms of Christian teaching,

felt himself ever at liberty to exercise personal choice, rejecting those doctrines which he did not approve, accepting such as most nearly conformed to his own religious ideal, promulgating new doctrines, or combining old ones into a new creed which in the course of time he might hope to persuade others to accept. The average American, therefore, was wont to change his religious affiliation with an ease and frequency astonishing if not incomprehensible to the European, accustomed to regard religious belief as a permanent attribute rather than as a matter for personal choice. Change of religious affiliation, be it noted, did not necessarily imply a corresponding change of religious belief. At times the transfer of membership from one religious sect to another might be merely the casual result of circumstances, of personal ties, or of business relation. In many instances, however, it was undoubtedly the expression of a genuine emotional experience, of new-found and intense religious conviction. The emotional revival which swept through this country at the close of the eighteenth century left its indelible stamp upon an impressionable generation; and, whether in the missionary meeting of a New England college or in the less restrained atmosphere of a western camp meeting, religion made its most telling appeal through emotional preaching and found its most natural utterance in emotional expression. A new and vibrant note of individualism destined in time to modulate the tenor of American religious experience had just been uttered in New England. The Unitarians of Boston, affirming the right of each individual to submit his religious creed to the test of intellect, had asserted their own belief in the inherent dignity of man. By laying stress upon the positive idea of human worth instead of upon the negative idea of sacrifice Unitarianism gave a tremendous impetus to those humanitarian movements which have been so closely identified with American religion since that day. Emotionalism, individualism, and practical humanitarian endeavor were the distinguishing traits of American religious life in 1815.

For a generation past there had been comparatively little friction between the various religious denominations. Even between Catholic and protestant there had as yet been few misunderstandings. Intimate contact of Catholic and protestant in

the west had done much to allay the ancient prejudice of creed, while the unswerving loyalty of Maryland Catholics, who controlled the policy of their church in this country until 1815, had quieted protestant fears that Catholic influence might prove adverse to the national interests of the United States. Catholic numbers were comparatively small, and although the spirit of propaganda was full of aspiration that fact had not been apprehended by the overwhelming protestant majority. The missionary movement of the nineteenth century was then in its infancy and the great free west lay open for the expansion of each and every form of religious faith. Neither sectarian jealousy nor sectarian rivalry had been thus far deeply aroused. Yet the old antagonism, though dormant, was still alive. Inevitably it would assert itself whenever the advance of one denomination should threaten to interfere with the expansion of another, or whenever the principles and practices of a religious organization should appear to be out of harmony with the spirit of American institutions. For a number of reasons the Catholic church was peculiarly exposed to the latter accusation. In spiritual concerns it was under the immediate jurisdiction of a foreign temporal ruler. Its membership and especially its clergy were largely recruited from foreign lands. The nature of its ecclesiastical organization was an apparent contradiction to the democratic American ideal. Moreover, in two respects at least, its discipline was expressly contrary to the methods of church administration then in vogue in the United States, and at both of these points legal relations between religious organizations and the civil government might be involved.

Legal tenure of church property in the United States was one of the complex features of the American system which the European found extremely difficult to comprehend. In the eyes of the law each religious organization possessed a two-fold character. As a voluntary religious organization it was practically free from state interference. As an economic unit, however, it was a legally constituted body possessing the right to acquire property and to conduct its own financial affairs. In this latter capacity religious organizations acquired a semi-legal character and like all other incorporated bodies might claim protection of the state. In view of the fact that ecclesiastical property as

such could have no legal existence under the constitution of the United States, it was imperative that the property rights of religious associations should be regulated in exactly the same manner as the affairs of all other financial corporations, that is to say, under a charter granted by the legislative authority of the state. These charters, although not always identical in terms, ordinarily confided the administration of church property to a board of trustees elected from and by the congregation. In many instances the method of election and the obligations of the trustees were expressly stipulated in the original instrument. In the state of New York a law enacted in 1784 rigidly excluded members of the clergy from such boards; and even where no such legal restriction was imposed, it had become the accepted custom for the control of the property to be vested in the congregation. From the American point of view the right of the laity to direct the management of finances was incontestable, and in 1815 all church property in the United States whether protestant or Catholic was administered by boards of trustees in which the laity formed a controlling majority. In so far as Catholic churches followed this procedure, however, a fundamental principle of Catholic administration had been set aside. Protestant custom had been followed with hesitation and reluctance by the Catholic clergy because immediately after the revolution it had appeared to be the only possible expedient for preventing the confiscation of all ecclesiastical property by the state governments. Controversies between Catholic laity and Catholic clergy over the ownership and control of church property might therefore and in fact actually did result from the inherent contradictions of two dissimilar legal systems. After 1820, when newly-appointed Catholic bishops unfamiliar with American traditions or with American legal procedure undertook to abolish the existing system through the exercise of ecclesiastical authority, these disputes between laity and clergy became increasingly acute. In New York, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and other cities the factional strife within Catholic congregations frequently resulted in violent outbreaks which forced the civil authorities to intervene. It is not surprising that the repetition of such occurrences tended to revive the latent protestant suspicion that the discipline of the Catholic church

might be incompatible with the spirit of American institutions. Furthermore, it must be noted that this suspicion was strengthened by direct appeals from Catholic congregations to the public opinion of the community for protection against the aggressions of their own bishops. In Philadelphia a situation already tense was aggravated by the fact that the bishop who endeavored to enforce his canonical authority was not at that moment a naturalized citizen of the United States.

Another characteristic feature of church government in the United States at variance with Catholic discipline was the selection of the minister or priest by the lay members of his congregation. The minister or priest thus chosen, whether by direct vote of the congregation or by the delegated vote of the trustees, was in the last resort dependent upon the laity for his appointment to office and for the payment of his annual income. Because this practice was recognized as thoroughly consistent with American ideas of government it had been almost universally adopted. In the Methodist church on account of the custom of itineracy certain modifications were obviously necessary. In the Catholic church there was still more urgent need for adjustment on account of the inconsistency then existing between principle and practice, for owing to the dearth of priests in the United States the bishops had permitted wide latitude in this respect. Thus through the exercise of unusual privileges American Catholics of the earlier generation had become accustomed to a procedure which prelates acquainted with canon law could not be expected to approve. The reorganization of the Catholic church after 1815 brought to the United States a number of Irish bishops habituated to a more vigorous exercise of authority than Catholics in this country had previously experienced. The attempts made by these bishops to remove priests who had received appointments from boards of trustees inevitably precipitated sharp conflicts between the bishops and Catholic congregations. Conspicuous instances of lay resistance to episcopal authority occurred in New York and in Philadelphia; in each of these cases the question of clerical appointment was closely related to the control of church property. The impression made upon the general public by these disputes was most unfortunate, for controversies between Catholic laity and

Catholic clergy in regard to rights which the American point of view had accepted as inviolable were distinctly unfavorable to the continuance of harmonious relations between religious denominations. The fact that such occurrences were by no means infrequent accounts in some degree for the steady increase of sectarian antagonism after 1815.

The modification of state constitutions which was necessary in order to bring them into accord with the principle of religious liberty recognized by the federal constitution had by no means proceeded uniformly since 1789. In several states religious disqualifications of one kind or another were still imposed and, since these could not be removed without appeals to political influence and to the support of public opinion, religion inevitably became associated with local politics. In the years 1816 and 1817, state elections in Connecticut and New Hampshire respectively turned upon religious issues. The revision of state constitutions in New York and Massachusetts in 1820 led to warm debate upon the subject. In Maryland, too, there was much discussion from 1818 to 1823 while bills for the removal of religious tests were pending in the state legislature. The agitation over Catholic emancipation in Ireland, which was warmly supported in this country after 1820, added cogency to the argument in favor of bringing state constitutions into conformity with the principles of the federal government. Expediency and principle were at this point in complete accord, and by 1832 the support of an established church was discontinued even in the state of Massachusetts. The gradual removal of religious disqualifications in the older states during the period of transition thus gave to the principle of religious liberty a more extended application than had been deemed expedient or practicable by the preceding generation.

Paradoxical as it may appear, the removal of constitutional restrictions did not dissolve the tie between religious and political interests. Churches were still dependent upon state legislatures for grants or modifications of charters, for authority to conduct educational and charitable institutions, to control church property, to raise funds by means of lotteries, or other extraordinary measures. Special legislative concessions were indispensable whenever the peculiar tenets of a religious sect for-

bade conformity with ordinary state regulations. Quakers and Mennonites, for instance, were permitted to affirm instead of taking the oath; Quakers in New York were exempt from military service; and in Louisiana the testimony of nuns could be taken out of court. Under normal conditions these concessions were granted without discussion as part of routine legislation. But if by any chance partisan feeling either political or religious were thrust into the discussion there was ever present the danger that sectarian prejudice might become blended with the rancor of political strife. Under such conditions purely local disagreements frequently led to unforeseen results. Among the numerous instances of the kind which occurred during this period one which has received attention from historians is the controversy between Presbyterian and Congregational factions in a small church near Dartmouth college. The contention, begun in 1815, soon led to a contest for the control of Dartmouth college and immediately thereafter invaded the realm of state politics. During the election of 1817 practically all the dissenting sects in New Hampshire, Baptists and Methodists, Universalists and "Free-thinkers" as well as Presbyterians, were aligned in a concerted attack upon the federalist party and the established church. The faction defeated in this election then appealed to the supreme court of New Hampshire and eventually carried its case to the supreme court of the United States, whence came the famous decision upholding the rights of the original board of coöpting trustees. The decision establishing the validity of charter grants, although technically favorable to the interests of the Congregational church, produced in effect quite the opposite result. Even while Webster was delivering his eloquent appeal the opposition in New Hampshire was being consolidated, and in 1819 a combination of religious and political forces in the state legislature succeeded in withdrawing the last vestiges of political authority from the established church. In 1820 a similar contest between Unitarian and orthodox members of the Dedham church was carried to the supreme court of Massachusetts, occasioning thereby much political and religious discussion and eventually leading to the legal recognition of the Unitarian faith. An incident no less significant, although perhaps it may be less familiar, occurred about the same time in Pennsylvania.

Here also the disturbance began in a local church. In 1821 one of the contending factions in a Catholic church in Philadelphia presented an application for a modification of its charter. Reversing the order used in other states, the procedure of Pennsylvania required that appeals of this kind should be first presented to the supreme court and only in case of refusal carried to the legislature of the state. The result, however, was exactly the same. In Pennsylvania as in New Hampshire sectarian apprehensions were aroused and during the election of 1823 each of the gubernatorial candidates made open appeals to the vote of the numerous denominations within the state.

Under certain circumstances it became the duty of state or local executives to deal with problems of a sectarian nature. The local executive, for example, was bound to assert his authority in case of quarrels between religious factions which threatened to disturb the public peace. Even more imperative became the need for intervention when the property rights of religious corporations were endangered. Legal cases arising from either of these two causes were frequently brought before the state courts by the contestants and, in more than one instance, it was found that the decision of the court hinged upon the interpretation of some point in religious doctrine. Decisions involving doctrinal interpretation were usually given by the court with extreme reluctance; when possible, the religious issue was tactfully ignored. In the Dartmouth college case, for example, the religious origin of the controversy has been almost entirely forgotten. Evasion, however, was frequently impossible, and in such cases state and federal courts did not hesitate to render judicial decisions which vitally affected the interests of one or another denomination. In the course of time the precedents established by such decisions have laid the foundations of a substantial code of civil church law.

The federal government of the United States, in theory if not in fact, has no legitimate concern with any particular religious organization. In this connection, however, it must be remembered that the prohibitive clause of the first amendment applied solely to congress. It was never binding upon the executive, nor was the judiciary affected by its restrictions. Literal interpretation of this clause, it is true, would have effectually

prevented any congressional action in regard to religious matters; it was early perceived that the acquisition of a federal district had made this strict interpretation quite untenable. During the course of a debate in 1805, when the first application for a charter of incorporation was presented to congress by a religious society in the District of Columbia, the constitutional argument was promptly set aside and thereafter charters of incorporation for churches as well as for educational and charitable institutions under sectarian management were granted without question to all denominations. About 1830 it became the accepted custom that each of these charters should be accompanied by a donation of land within the District. Acts of incorporation for religious organizations of national scope such as the American bible society or the American Baptist general convention, on the contrary, were invariably refused upon grounds of constitutionality as well as of expediency. Religious questions arising in the territories of the United States likewise demanded congressional action. Congress alone possessed the authority to confirm the land grants made to Catholic churches by the French and Spanish governments, or to make fresh grants to such claimants in case the original deeds had disappeared. A precedent which might have proved embarrassing to future congresses was avoided in 1811 when the presidential veto prevented a grant of land to a Baptist congregation in Mississippi. Indirect aid, however, could still be tendered to the various religious organizations by means of land grants or direct appropriations for the support of educational and charitable institutions under sectarian control. The precedent for such grants was established in 1819 when an appropriation was made for the Connecticut asylum for the deaf and dumb. In 1826 a grant was made to a similar institution in Kentucky, and in the same year a sum of money was appropriated for the support of a college which had just been founded in the District of Columbia for the purpose of providing suitable education for Baptist missionaries. Minor favors at the command of congress were also readily accepted by the several denominations. The salary of chaplain to congress, although not large, was a substantial aid to a new and struggling church. Franking privileges facilitated the circulation of religious literature.

The remission of customs duties lowered the cost of church vestments and of altar furnishings for Catholic churches. The opportunity to preach in the halls of congress on Sunday was also welcomed since it conveyed to the denomination a gratifying sense of sectarian prestige.

The relations between the federal executive and religious organizations had been determined from the first not by constitutional limitations or restrictions but rather by a sense of fitness and propriety. Points of contact between the two had been well established even before the constitution had been adopted. The department of state, for example, had then lent its aid to facilitate the national organization of Protestant Episcopal and Catholic churches. Formal expressions of loyalty from all the larger religious denominations had been sent to the president immediately after the first inauguration. Applications or requests from religious organizations invariably received the most deferential consideration not only from the president but from the heads of executive departments as well. With the expansion of federal authority after 1815, occurring at a moment when religious organizations were likewise extending the scope of their activities, the range of contact between the two was necessarily broadened. Under these circumstances executive patronage became a matter of some concern to the agents of religious organizations who were in communication with the heads of federal executive departments. Individual members of the various denominations, therefore, were frequently called upon to use what personal influence they might possess on behalf of candidates who were in a sense the representatives of a particular form of religious faith. In certain departments this representation was especially desirable. Minor offices in the department of state were of distinct advantage to the Catholic church on account of the diplomatic complications which threatened to arise from its relation to the Roman see. The American board of foreign missions, ever watchful of the interests of its missions in the Sandwich islands, relied upon the secretary of the navy for their protection. The secretary of war was continuously in communication with agents of the various missionary societies—Baptist, Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist, Quaker, Moravian, Episcopalian, and Catholic—then coöperat-

ing with the federal government in the attempt to deal justly with the Indian problem. This practical coöperation between the government and religious societies for the furtherance of measures which the government was either unprepared or disinclined to undertake was perhaps the most significant feature of religious development during this period. Not that the idea itself was in any wise new; on the contrary, precedent had long since been established. Its prominence at this particular period may be ascribed to the fact that coöperation was then carried out upon a more extended scale than had previously been attempted. Through the conduct of enterprises in which both were deeply concerned the relations between the government and religious organizations for the first time began to assume a systematic and definite form. The dual control of Indian missions furnishes the best illustration of the system at work. After 1819 the secretary of war distributed among the various missionary organizations the annual appropriation of ten thousand dollars set apart for the civilization of the Indians. The societies then appointed the teachers and directed the management of all Indian schools. The government for its part lent official sanction to mission workers and bore a considerable portion of the expense. Missions and schools among the Indian tribes were conducted, therefore, in accord with a well-conceived coöperative plan. In sum, the federal government although having no concern with the tenets of any religious sect was nevertheless in close and intimate touch with movements directed by religious organizations. The religious organizations, on the other hand, were dependent to some extent at least upon the federal government for the protection which enabled them to carry on the work of religious expansion either in this country or in foreign lands.

During the period under review the characteristic features of American religious life became more sharply outlined and accentuated. Individualism remained throughout the dominant note. Emotionalism everywhere prevailed. The number and variety of sects was increased by the formation of new communistic societies and by schisms within the older denominations. The solidarity of the larger sects was thus indirectly strengthened by the elimination of discordant elements as well as through

the consolidation of their national organizations. At the same time the scope of religious activity was vastly enlarged; missionary societies were multiplied, schools and colleges were founded. In new communities the churches exercised both civic and social functions, caring for the poor and sick, educating the children, providing intellectual diversion and social relaxation, taking the leadership in business and local political affairs. With the growth of the religious periodical press the churches gained an additional means of directing public opinion. Religion as a force in American life thus steadily gained in influence and in weight.

Meanwhile the relative strength of the various denominations had been undergoing modification. With the opening of the west and the steady influx of an immigrant population the membership of the Methodist, Baptist, and Catholic churches rapidly increased, the largest proportional increase being in the Catholic church. Relatively if not actually the numbers of the Presbyterian, Congregational, Quaker, and Protestant Episcopal churches therefore declined. For some years longer, however, these older churches were destined to retain the social, intellectual, and moral leadership to which they had been accustomed. As a reflex of this changing proportion there was a noticeable heightening of sectarian feeling. Under the changing conditions the Catholic church in the United States found itself in a precarious situation. Its membership and priesthood were largely foreign; its missionary funds were derived from European countries; and, as has already been pointed out, in two respects at least its canon law was in direct conflict with American custom. Moreover, dissensions within its fold invited the intervention of protestant civil officials at a moment when Catholic Europe had become identified with the political idea of absolute rule.

The potentiality of religious forces at this or at any other period of the history of the United States is too incalculable for measurement in accurate terms. Much depends upon the individual, more perhaps upon the strength of religious organization, while something must always be allowed for the effect of diverse creeds upon each other. Suffice it to conclude, therefore, that during these years of transition and expansion the

Christian religion was leaving its permanent impress upon American institutions and that before the close of the period religious organizations had come to be recognized as influential factors in the political development of the nation.

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